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It's Called 'Hot Pursuit'

On Oct. 1 1985, Israeli jets screeched across 1,500 miles of the Mediterranean and bombed Palestine Liberation Organization headquarters in Tunis. Militarily, it was yet another almost routine Israeli triumph that produced an almost routine reaction: the president of the United States applauded, and the Arab world went bananas. It suggested Reagan reconsider.

This piece of recent history is worth recalling if only because no one seems to recall it. The Israelis hit Tunisia because that's where their enemy was. But when the Nicaraguan Sandinistas did the same thing by going after the contras in Honduras, it was the turn of the United States to mimic the Arab world. The president reconsidered. The administration went bananas.

But the Sandinistas merely did what the Israelis did just last year, what Pershing did when he chased Pancho Villa deep into Mexico and what, more recently, the United States did during the Vietnam war. In what was called "hot pursuit" and justified as such, Cambodia was invaded because it was being used as a sanctuary by communist troops. This managed both to widen and, ironically, help end the war. More and more, people came to see the Vietnam war as a spill that could not be mopped.

Sandinista politics is execrable, but not its logic. Like the White House, the Nicaraguan leaders know Congress will cave. They know that one way or another, aid is on the way to their enemies, the contras. As for the Democratic compromises, they suffer from the party's long alliance with labor. This is the Taft-Hartley mentality applied to war—a 90-day cooling off period in which, should the tooth fairy grant it, nonnegotiable differences will be negotiated.

Congress appears not to appreciate Sandinista logic. The speaker of the House is appalled that the Nicaraguan junta did not consider itself bound by a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives. It went for the enemy's throat despite the recent defeat of Reagan's contra aid proposal. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) seems similarly vexed. In a voice heavy with sarcasm, he

credited the Sandinistas with playing into the hands of their Washington enemies.

But their real enemies are across the border in Honduras. That is where the contras are camped and where they are trained. It is from Honduras that the contras launch their attack on Nicaragua, and it is into Honduras that, from time to time, the Sandinista rush in hot pursuit. This is not the first incursion nor, you can bet, will it be the last. The war will be widened.

The administration's mock hysteria over yet another Sandinista incursion into Honduras is something of a public service. It shows that the attempt to topple the Sandinista regime cannot be limited to Nicaragua. The war against communism in Central America is almost sure to involve Honduras. Already, the country has become an American garrison, a branch office of the CIA. The \$20 million President Reagan wired Tegucigalpa is a mere pittance compared with what we have poured into the country.

For the moment, Honduras can fend for itself. It has an air force unparalleled in Central America and could level Managua if the 1976 earthquake had not already done the job. At any rate, with U.S. forces on almost constant maneuvers there, our loyal friend to the south is in no real danger. The same cannot be said for Costa Rica. Lacking a real army, it could turn out to be the "Cambodia" in this mix. To save it, we may have to destroy it. Sorry.

The Sandinistas are revolutionaries, Marxists of one sort or another. Their ideology makes them loathe the United States; their history makes them fear it. Their intent is to finish off the contras before the United States makes them stronger. Ronald Reagan is a committed anticommunist. His intent is to finish off the Sandinistas before he leaves office. The war that is coming, like all those in the past, will be hard to contain. The Sandinista incursion—and the American reaction to it—proves once again that there is only one sure way to stop a war from spreading. You have to stop it from starting.